

# MOVEMENT AND CHARACTER

LECTURE, LONDON, 1946

by Maria Montessori

*Dr. Montessori's words from the 1946 London Lectures describe principles of intelligence and character, the work of the hand, and movement with a purpose as being integral to self-construction. The perfection of movement is spiritual, says Dr. Montessori. Repetition of practical life exercises are exercises in movement with the dignity of human cooperation and a sense of equality. Her emphasis on exactness and "harmony" between the psychic and motor parts speaks to the importance of practical life.*

I must stress the importance of movement. The transformation in the character of the difficult children I described was directly related to movement. We do everything through movement and therefore it must be important. Psychologically speaking, movement has not been rightly considered in the past, when its importance was not realized. Now its importance has been demonstrated by the children; when children who have the same deviations as adults become concentrated in work with their hands, they are changed. Their characters become formed and stabilized. Movement in this sense has some correspondence with the unity of the individual.

If we watch the behavior of animals, we will see that each species is characterized by its own special movements. Each species is characterized by its form and also by its movements. The movement of animals is hereditary, but man's movements are not hereditary. Man constructs his movements by himself.

We must consider the importance of the muscles themselves. Suppose you began to take all the muscles away from the body, from the legs, the arms, the hands, and the face, what would be left?

---

*Reprinted from The 1946 London Lectures, pages 158-164, copyright © 2012 by Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company. Clio editions of The Montessori Series are now available from Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, <http://www.montessori-pierson.com/>.*

Just a skeleton. Think of this: The purpose of the skeleton is to sustain the muscles—bones are just rigid things to which the muscles are attached. The head is just a box of bone to hold the brain.

Movement is correlated with character—not just with intelligence, but also with character. Language does not form character. Language is constructed in relation to the intelligence. Movement is correlated with unity of character.

If we were to take the skeleton away, what would be left? Organs and muscles would be left detached from each other—the brain, the lungs, the intestines, the liver, etc. would not be held in position of attached. The person would not be a person anymore. All these organs, the brain, heart, lungs, organs of digestion, etc., are only concerned with living. They are a vegetative form of life. These organs work to maintain life; they are found in animals as well as in humans. The brain is the director because innumerable nerves come from the central nervous system and go to the cells that form the muscles. Through these, the urge of the will is conveyed to the muscles. The muscles are the servants of the will. These special muscles are called voluntary muscles. The purpose of the will is to move these muscles in a coordinated fashion. The organs that are in relation with the cerebrum, like the eyes, the great sensorial organs for sight, and the ears, the organs for hearing, are very little things. They are like a little electric light bulb, small in proportion to the big area it illuminates. The sensory organs in the head are small in comparison to the center, the cerebrum.

Instead, there are a great many muscles. The body is made of muscles and they give the body its external form. The brain and the muscles are man's specialty. Without hereditary movement, man must have a guide; his movements have not been determined for him. Thus, the construction of movement is an important part of a child's development—not just a coordinated movement, but movement with a purpose. Coordinated movement must be involved with something great, and must be directly connected to the brain and the intelligence. There is a correspondence between intelligence and movement that brings unity. When this unity between the nervous system and the muscles is established, movement begins.

The body is like a very complicated mechanical machine that can be studied. The mind of man must be able to make this machine work according to the circumstances in which man finds himself. This movement is not hereditary, but is acquired through experience in the environment. The problem is not to move, but to move in relationship with the intelligence. The individual could make no conquests if it were not for this relationship between the will and the muscles. I can do things because I have my machine, my body, at my disposal. I have to be master of my mechanism and then I can be certain of my actions. I do not get this beautiful machine readymade. I must construct it for myself. In order to make it more and more perfect, I must form it from the beginning and make it perfect as possible. Nature urges me on in this. Nature urges me to do certain things in the environment. Each individual must do these things. Each individual must perfect his own instrument for a purpose in the external world. Everyone must work with a purpose: one cuts wood, another dances, another is an artist. In order that each individual may do what he wants to do, he must first construct his own body to be an instrument that will enable him to have his own special behavior in the environment. Every man must work.

The work of men is to modify and transform the earth. Their bodies are not important just for movement, but for movement with a special aim. Everyone must develop his or her body to be a perfect machine prepared for a special aim. The kind of work man does is different from one person to another, but all together the various activities of men bring about human civilization. Children do not know what their future work will be. But they know that they must prepare their instrument from the beginning. The purpose for which these instruments will be used is different for each person. This is the great importance of movement.

We see the child who is freely active change in character. Movement is correlated with character—not just with intelligence, but also with character. Language does not form character. Language is constructed in relation to the intelligence. Movement is correlated with unity of character.

Some people appear to be guided by an inner light that directs them to a specific purpose in the external world, which defines their

behavior. Whichever way, each man must prepare for some purpose, conscious or unconscious, which is then integrated into the harmony of work in the world. It is this preparation that especially interests us. It is interesting to see what the child does himself when guided by the inner urge of nature. Nature urges the child at this age to imitate other people.

In our schools we see that all children have a natural urge to perfect their movements, such as achieving equilibrium, with exercises of practical work. From this we have seen that all development of movement must be related to some intelligent purpose. This is the right way to develop. We must understand this. Because we are materialistic in our ideas of how movement should develop, we see the body as machines in itself, and not as a machines working together with the intellect.

We try not to develop the body in a gymnasium. This is not a natural way. It is not movement with an intelligent purpose. It is movement of different parts of the body at the command of another. We give physical education because we think that movement can facilitate function. This is an error. It is treating the body as though it were decapitated—dead—and moving it as we would a mechanical machine. You have not a right to do this because movement is a part of life. Life has a guide. You have no right to substitute your commands for this guide, for this internal urge. You have no right to order children to do gymnastic exercises, to order exercise to be done to commands and time. This method may break the personality and it will not perfect movement.

The perfection of movement is spiritual. It is something that aids the development of the whole personality. Gymnastics are useless and dangerous, especially to little children who are in the period of constructing their personalities.

We can have activities for children that will develop their bodies instead of gym. These activities have a purpose, and permit movement, and so they help in the development of character. The exercises of practical life, for example, are physical exercises. Instead of following the adult's commands, the child responds to the call of the environment. The child has an urge to imitate what he sees

done in his environment, which are natural exercises. When we offer him the opportunity, he acts with purpose; he is free to choose and he is so active that these exercises are a real gym. I think they are not merely a gym for the child but also for the adult. A child cannot really develop through purposeless forced movements. Can you imagine that all the work there is to do in the world does not afford us sufficient exercise? People who do all their own housework are often very thin. Nowadays servants are hard to come by, so we get very tired from all the housework. We have to go up and down stairs, sweep, polish, wash, cook, and do the dishes. We are all condemned to do the exercises of practical life now, and isn't this far better for us than gymnastic exercises? We actually move very little in a gym. When we have done the same exercises a few times we are tired. But a woman who does her own housework is doing exercises all day long.

When children do these exercises, they repeat them many times with pleasure. They develop physically and they develop their characters; they develop constancy. A housewife is very constant; she doesn't get much help from her husband. She does all this work with a definite purpose, the good of her family, and so she is happy.

All natural work like this has a higher purpose. It develops character. We must understand that if we give children this active life with a great many motives of activity, activities that have a useful purpose, the children perfect their movements. There is no need for an artificial environment like a gymnasium. If you think that this is not enough exercise for the children, they can go into the garden and find work there. If a child picks a bunch of flowers, he bends and stands up each time he picks one. If you want to make the muscles strong, give the children garden tools and let them dig, etc. They will perspire and their blood circulation will improve. They will do all these activities with pleasure, which prolongs the activity and in this way their bodies get far more exercise than they would in a gymnasium.

We must understand that if we give children this active life with a great many motives of activity, activities that have a useful purpose, the children perfect their movements. There is no need for an artificial environment like a gymnasium.

You cannot have effort without interest and purpose. There is no interest if the intelligence does not cooperate. The person must be interested. If the person is not unified, he will not be interested. So we must have interest first and then work with an intelligent purpose, work which is freely chosen by the individual.

There is no limit to the amount of work there is to be done in the world. If you love working, there is a lot to choose from, and education must integrate this. We must understand that the exercises of practical life are not intended as training for the acquisition of practical skills. They are a kind of gymnastic training for the acquisition of practical skills. They are a kind of gymnastic training for the harmonious development of the psychic and motor parts of the individual. The individual becomes a unity so that a movement is not just a movement of the hand, but a movement of the whole person.

When I was a little girl in school, we had gymnastics of the hand; we moved one finger at a time and this was very tiring, because it was based on a misguided notion and the exercise certainly did not develop character. We can only prepare men of character if we give them work which has purpose. Each individual must be a person who can make his personal contribution to the complex work of humanity. All the exercises we give a help in this sense—they help the development of the psychic part of an individual. When you see children beginning to love exactness, for example, you see that they have a growing inner interest which progresses to the limits of exactness. It is one thing to do a piece of work; it is another to do it with exactness. Great intelligence and interest are necessary before you can achieve exactness, so a child's character will grow through these exercises.

If everyone had done the exercises of practical life, there would be social equality. It is not that everyone would have to do all their own work, but if they know how to do it, they would appreciate this work.

Look at the children whom we called “porters” at an earlier age, who loved to carry furniture from one place to another. I have seen a small child carry furniture from a room into the garden, and when it was all in the garden, take it back again. This is also gym-

nastics. It also develops ability, for this child had to be very careful not to spoil the furniture. He had to be very careful in maneuvering pieces through the door (a furniture removal man has to be very skillful) and children naturally like exactness. This exactness does not come because the teacher teaches it, but because the child has an inner guide, a guide that leads him to perfection and to perfect movement. If we have lost this guide we are unfortunate, but the child has not lost the guide. We must make it possible for the child to reach this point of exactness. This urge for exactness has not been understood in schools.

A gymnasium cannot give perfection. Even in many Montessori schools the people who started the school have come to me and asked what they are to do about a gymnasium because all the parents asked about the gymnasium. This is because they have not understood fully. If the children are not getting enough exercise, they must give them more work to do. Perhaps the parents don't understand this, but if the teachers include a gymnasium in the school, then they have clearly not understood what I meant. This matter of having a gymnasium often overshadows the question of education in schools.

Firstly, we must have a real education in line with nature. Secondly, we must have education that will help society, because all people must work and be active. Today, people have the opportunity to be educated, but they cannot be happy if they have to sit in a school all day long listening to a teacher. Civilization has given us motorcars, etc., so that we need not walk; we have become inert and therefore we have to do gymnastic exercises. It is better to use your physical power for some useful work than become inert and have to take exercise. Why are we such slaves? Why don't we want to be free? We are not free because we are so limited. This is a very important social question today.

If everyone had done the exercises of practical life, there would be social equality. It is not that everyone would have to do all their own work, but if they know how to do it, they would appreciate this work. This is nothing new. Nature commands us. The child shows us this law of nature in his development. When the children work according to the laws of nature, their character is formed, their de-

viations are cured. The difficult child becomes a happy, nice child. Therefore these exercises of practical life are not trivial. They are fundamental. We ourselves cannot change a difficult child or help him in his construction.

Today, gymnastic exercises are given in the early morning on the radio to music. And we do this while there is such a great need for all human energies to work together; when there is so much work to be done in the world, we waste time on gym. This must not happen, especially not in education.

